

Historical Society of Decatur County

Vol. 18 No. 3

The Bulletin

Fall 2013

Greensburg, Indiana

To Autumn - William Blake (1783)

O Autumn, laden with fruit, and stain'd
With blood of the grape, pass not, but sit

Beneath my shady roof; there thou may'st rest,

And tune thy jolly voice to my fresh pipe,
And all the daughters of the year shall dance!

Sing now the lusty song of fruits and flowers.

"The narrow bud opens her beauties to
The sun, and love runs in her thrilling veins;

Blossoms hang round the brows of Morning, and
Flourish down the bright cheek of modest Eve,
Till clust'ring Summer breaks forth into singing,
And feather'd clouds strew flowers round her head.

"The spirits of the air live in the smells
Of fruit; and joy, with pinions light, roves round
The gardens, or sits singing in the trees."

Thus sang the jolly Autumn as he sat,
Then rose, girded himself, and o'er the bleak
Hills fled from our sight; but left his golden load.

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Memories of Decatur County Farming Calvin D. Davis

As a historian and a professor I have been primarily concerned with the history of the foreign relations of the United States, but I have also maintained interests in Indiana archaeology and the history of the farming community in which I was born and in which I grew up. I was born December 3, 1927, to Harry Russell and Abbie Jane Moncrief Davis at the Westport farm home of my grandparents, Bert and Minnie DeArmond Davis. My parents loaded their meager possessions on a farm wagon on January 13, 1929, and moved to a farm about two miles north on State Road 3. Grandpa Davis had bought that farm on Christmas Eve, 1928. My parents became owners of that farm after Grandma Davis died in 1956. My sister, Joan Davis Eubank, and I became its owners after our mother's death in 1993. The farm contains 94 acres which lie between Wyaloosung Creek and one of its branches, about a quarter mile north of South Decatur High School. Eighty acres are tilled. The remaining acres, dominated by the Wyaloosung and its branch, are not farmed under arrangements with the Department of Agriculture. There are no fences except on the south side where a line fence is made necessary by our neighbor's cows. Danny Knarr, our renter, plants corn and soybeans. Sometimes he plants wheat. He raises no animals. In fact there are in buildings in which they could find shelter. The house and a shed we call a barn are the farm's only buildings.

How very different was the farm and its operation from 1929 to about 1960! Besides the house there was a "bank barn" built on the side of a hill lined with cement-covered limestone. There were stables for cows, sheep, horses, and mules. There was a tightly constructed granary for wheat, and a corn crib built of narrow boards with gaps between them. Hay lofts occupied much of the space above the stables. There was a space in which the wagon was kept. Near the barn was a hog house with a concrete feeding floor on one side and there was a garage. Near the house were a cellar house, a wood shed, and a chicken house. The farm was divided into five fields for grain and hay. The areas along the Wyaloosung and its branch provided pasture.

My father planted corn, wheat, hay, and sometimes oats. He raised cattle and hogs. For several years he also raised sheep, but sad experiences with dogs put an end to that part of our farming.

Preparing the ground for corn was one of my father's most difficult tasks. He used a single-row walking plow drawn by a team. Keeping the plow in the ground required all his strength. After plowing he would disc and use a heavy wooden frame called a "drag" to loosen the soil. When the soil was ready, Uncle Charles Davis would fill canisters on the two-row across the field, Uncle Charlie, the horses, and the planter would go until the field was planted in wonderfully straight lines. When the corn came up and started to grow my father had reason to be pleased with his brother's work, for it was time to use a cultivating plow. This plow loosened the soil between rows. Using this plow was difficult despite the fact that men using it rode. Farmers no doubt found these plows easier to use than hoeing corn as their forefathers had done. Farmers often planted beans and pumpkins in cornfields and they had to be especially careful when cultivating these areas. Today most farmers do not do "deep plowing"; chisel plows which do little more than scratch and cut the surface are used. Cultivating plows are obsolete. Fields are sprayed with chemicals which eliminate weeds. They also cause corn to have a deep green color. Today's cornfield, its green stalks close together - and no beans and pumpkins - looks little like the cornfields of the 1930s and 1940s.

Harvesting corn has also changed drastically. When I was growing up the first line of a famous poem written by James Whitcomb Riley in 1882 still seemed an accurate description of a corn-field ready for harvest: "When frost is on the punkin and the fodders in the shock..." With long knives farmers cut corn stalks and gathered them into shocks. Some farmers did not go to so much trouble. They drove wagons into the fields, walked alongside the wagons and, using shucking pegs, they shucked the corn and threw it into the wagons. A few farmers simplified the harvest even further, driving hogs into the field and letting them do their own harvesting. One of my memories is of my father in winter loading a sled with fodder and taking it to the barn for shucking. Today our corn crop goes from the farm to Premier Ag at once. The corn harvest which once went on for over a period of weeks is today a matter of a few hours.

Wheat production has changed as much as the growing, harvesting, and marketing of corn. When the first settlers arrived in Decatur County planting wheat and other small grains was probably much the same as it was in Jesus's Parable of the Sower in the fourth chapter of the Gospel According to St. Mark. During the Nineteenth Century machines were invented which dropped seeds and fertilizer through tubes. My father used a wheat drill which was very much like drills which appeared in the Sears and Roebuck catalogs of the 1890s. With a drill drawn by horses he could quickly plant a field in wheat after the corn harvest. (Crop rotation was standard practice). Today's wheat drills are much larger and are, of course, drawn by tractors. Changes in the harvesting of wheat and other small grains have been even greater than their planting. When my great-grandfather, John T. Davis, moved from Union County to Sandcreek Township in Decatur County in the late 1850s he brought with him a "wheat cradle" which was a scythe with a wooden frame to catch the wheat as it was cut. The farmer gathered wheat from the cradle and tied it into sheaves. At one time I owned a flail which was probably used on a threshing floor in this county during the early years of the Nineteenth Century. (When fire destroyed the barn and cellar house in 1966 the flail, too burned). In fact the cutting of wheat and the separation of grain from chaff was much the same before the late 1850s as they were in the Old Testament's Book of Ruth, but soon after the Nineteenth Century's middle years new machinery and

methods made more changes in small grain production than had been made in more than 2,000 years. Cyrus H. McCormick's invention of the reaper - a platform edged with a blade and equipped with a reel to bend the wheat towards the blade- made a profound difference. It was not long before there was new machinery which bound the wheat into sheaves. Threshing machines may have appeared even before reapers became binders. Lewis Harding in his History of Decatur County, published in 1915, told how the Jackson and Butler Company on July 12, 1859, demonstrated a threshing machine at the J.E. Robbins farm a mile south of Greensburg. He said that "Several hundred farmers from all parts of the county were present to witness the test."

Threshing machines and binders were much improved within a few years after the Civil War. Grandpa Davis who was born in 1872 often told how when he was a boy his threshing job required him to stand in a wagon and cut the wires which bound the sheaves before they were thrown into the threshing machine. The binder he himself owned years later used twine instead of wire. Ralph Ponsler in the 1984 History of Decatur County recalled the shocking of wheat as binders dropped the sheaves. He recalled that "we put ten bundles in a shock and two on top." I have shocked wheat but I do not remember counting the sheaves. I do recall that we "spread out" the sheaves on top so as to make a protective cover.

My grandfather, father, and uncle belonged to a threshing "run" which included most farmers who lived between Westport and Letts. Brook Smith of Jennings County furnished the threshing machine and the steam engine for the greater part of the "run's" existence. I remember, especially, an incident which happened in the late 30s or the early 40s. I was at the road side watching the threshing machine and the steam engine come up State Road 3. The engine was belching thick black smoke. Every now and then Smith would sound the whistle. My Airedale, Rags, stood beside me. He thought it was his duty to stop the monster. He barked as loudly as he could. When it began to turn into our drive, Rags yelped, and ran towards the house. He opened the back door himself and hid under a day bed, whimpering and crying. His humiliation was complete! Smith soon maneuvered his thresher and steam engine into the wheat field. Already some of the farmers were there busily loading the wagons. Before nightfall there was a large straw pile and many bushels of grain had been deposited in the granary.

After World War II combines replaced both binders and threshing machines and threshing runs disappeared. Their disappearance was a serious loss to the social lives of farm communities. On some runs farm wives cooked large noon-day meals for the men. On ours they sent lunches with them. However the meal was provided there was a lunch break during which there was much talking. A week or so after the harvest there was a "settling up" meeting. Often wives and children attended. Visiting and games - and ice cream - made these meetings pleasant occasions. Present day harvesting of wheat is more efficient but I doubt that it leaves as many happy memories as threshing did in the days of the threshing run.

Hay crops - primarily timothy and clover - were planted "broadcast". My father used a canvas bag with a long metal tube to scatter seed. He began to plant soybeans in the late 1930s. I do not recall how he planted them, but I do remember he was primarily interested in them as hay. Cattle and horses liked the stalks just as much as the beans. Today Danny Knarr plants almost half of the eighty acres in beans. At harvest time he is especially concerned with the beans rather than the stalks, for there is a large market in this country and other lands for them. Certain small areas in the fields are planted in grass. This is done primarily to provide quick exits for water after severe rains. Danny bales the hay from these areas in huge circular bales, quite different from the small bales produced in my youth. Today so much hay is baled and left in the fields until needed that many traditional barns with large hay lofts are no longer used and are deteriorating and collapsing.

During the 1930s and 1940s barns with large hay lofts were valuable possessions. The timing of the hay harvest was more flexible than wheat and it was never necessary for farmers to organize themselves to harvest hay as they formed "runs" to harvest wheat, but haying still required several men. My father worked with his brother and his father's hired hand and often with a hand or renter from the farm owned by his uncle, Elbert Davis.

Mowing machines were invented before 1890 and had not changed much by 1930. Drawn by horses they quickly cut a field of hay. A large rake was used to pile the hay into long rows. After allowing several days for curing, farmers drove wagons into the fields. Many of them had hay loaders attached. Some men simply "forked" the hay onto the wagons. The wagons were drawn to the front of the barn and a hay fork attached to a track under the top of the barn roof was pulled down, and loaded. The men who did the loading yelled so that the person driving the horse to the hayfork on the other side of the barn could hear. That person then told his horse to pull. Up went the load into the hay loft where men were waiting to mow it away. I drove the horse to the hayfork. Neither I nor the horse, a huge Belgian mare we called Florie, liked the job but we did it year after year without accident although a broken rope could easily have had serious consequences. Men working in hay lofts had to exercise care to avoid overheating on hot days. Men loading hay forks on wagons at the front of the barn also faced peril. My father was thrown from a loaded wagon when the rope on the hay fork broke as he was helping our neighbor, Perry Chatten. He sustained injuries from which he never fully recovered.

Our garden, three quarters of an acre on the north side of the house, was an essential part of our economy. We raised potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, green beans, and other vegetables. Apple trees and a grape arbor provided us with fruit and juice for jam and jelly. Blackberries grew along fence rows, especially along the only rail fence which had survived from pioneer days. Chiggers, poison ivy, and snakes made picking the berries a challenge but we always had cans of blackberries and jars of blackberry jelly.

Raising chickens was one of Mother's strongest interests. During our first years on the farm she set hens in the barn, using eggs from our flock after buying roosters from other farms. I recall going with my parents to Mr. Valentine Hahn's farm near Millhousen to buy roosters. (I had seen pictures of Father Time in a book at school and I thought Mr. Hahn looked like him! Years later I learned he was a Civil War veteran – the only one I ever saw.) Mother was patient with bad-tempered setting hens, but after a few years was happy to buy a new brooder house and to buy baby chicks from Carney's Hatchery on the Greensburg Square.

Eggs were an important part of a weekly ritual – going to Westport on Saturday night. Mother would take eggs to McCullough's grocery where Naomi McCullough told Mother how much she would pay for them. Of course the amount received was always used to pay for groceries. People in the 1930s and 1940s almost invariably talked about "trading" at their grocery store. Bartering during pioneer days had been usual at trading posts and the word trading was still used although the sale of eggs was about the only example of bartering or trading one could still find.

Cows and hogs were of major concern on all farms. Cows had to be milked morning and evening. Milking machines were available but few farms had them. Both of my parents did the milking. Eventually I helped. Even before that I was helping with the cream separator. Every few days, cream was taken to the cream station (or creamery) in Westport where Grace Weekly tested and paid for it. We "slopped" the hogs with skim milk. In the late 1930s we began selling whole milk to a company which established a route through our area. Most of our hogs and many calves and steers were trucked to Indianapolis stock yards for sale, but we also had hogs and cattle butchered. Our farm never had a "smoke house" and only in the earliest years did we do any butchering at the farm. When my father's distant cousin, Harry E. Davis, began butchering in Westport we became appreciative customers. My father did, however, sugar cure meat, using the new brooder house for that purpose.

The Wysaloosing farm kept us well supplied with food but it earned little money for anything else. There were years of extreme drought during the 1930s; there were also years when there was

abundant rain. Crops flourished but prices went down. The basic problems were over-production and inadequate markets. It was a problem which had been developing for decades. The first years of the Twentieth Century were relatively prosperous for American farmers. The First World War greatly increased demand for food, but that demand disappeared soon after the war ended. American farmers were in depression during the early 1920s. A weak revival came and then depression again. During the administration of President Calvin Coolidge Congress tried to enact measures to stimulate the search for foreign markets, but the president vetoed them. The Great Depression that began in 1929 hurt farmers severely. The banking crisis of 1933 destroyed financial resources which might have helped them recover. Here in Decatur County, few banks outside of Greensburg reopened their doors after the bank "Holiday" at the beginning of Franklin Roosevelt's presidency.

The financial disasters and depression came as American agriculture was absorbing one of the most important technological developments in its history: the tractor. Henry Ford's Fordson tractor first came off the assembly line in April 1917 - the month during which the United States declared war on Germany. By 1924 Ford was producing 750 tractors a year, and by 1927 half the tractors in the United States. Professor Robert H. Ferrell in his distinguished study of the Coolidge administration, The Presidency of Calvin Coolidge, (Lawrence, Kansas, 1998) has pointed out that the Fordson and other tractors caused the decline of the horse and mule population, and notes that farmers who had fewer draft animals planted less hay and more grains. As the acreage devoted to corn and wheat increased so did the problem of overproduction. It seems certain, moreover, that the tractor which could be used with all kinds of farming equipment would have more quickly led to the disappearance of horses and mules if there had been better markets. It is unlikely that threshing runs and other harvesting practices described in this essay would still have existed when World War II began. Plows, planters, cultivators, harvesting equipment, tractors, corn pickers, and combines cost more than they could afford.

The Roosevelt administration devoted some of its strongest efforts to relieving the problem of farmers. It enacted restrictions on the planting of many crops. Often farmers were told to reduce acreage for wheat and to increase that for grasses. These restrictions were very much disliked by farmers who had never before been told to decrease their planting. Whether or not the New Deal measures were of real benefit is a question which has not been satisfactorily answered.

The incomes of people in farming communities did not improve much under the New Deal. I recall that Grandpa Davis bought a Farmall tractor in about 1936 or 1937 and that was probably the most expensive thing he bought during that era. Money was in such a short supply that we did not put electricity into our house until 1947. We had no telephone until after my sister was born in 1934. After we got it neighbors often asked to use it. People without property were in desperate circumstances. I recall the plight of a family of seven children which lived near us. The husband and father could rarely find work. Finally he got on the WPA which meant an income of about \$45 a month.

The problem of overproduction and inadequate markets slowly disappeared. John F. Kennedy coming to the presidency in 1961 talked about a soil bank as a means of lessening production, but gradually everyone forgot it. The growth of population in this country and round the world was meaning more and more markets for our agricultural producers. If the population had not grown so fast it is highly unlikely that the giant hog raising enterprises in Clay Township or the Hulsbosch dairy in Jackson Township, some of the most important developments in Decatur County agriculture in recent years, could exist.

Ezra Lathrop 1803-1885

At 2:35 p.m. last Sunday, December 6th, at his residence on North Franklin street, Mr. Ezra Lathrop departed this life at the age of eighty-two years. He was one of the pioneers of this section of the county, removing with his father in 1817 from Connecticut, where he was born on March 12, 1803. He settled first in Dearborn county but removed shortly afterward to Ripley county. When Decatur county, then a portion of an Indian reservation, was opened to settlers in 1821, his father and family settled upon a tract of land now a portion of this city. The history of the family during their period was the common history of the pioneer settlers, with the usual hardships and trials to be endured. In 1824 Mr. Lathrop married Miss Abbie Potter, who proved a helpmeet to him, and assisted him to increase his worldly possessions until August 21st, 1877, when she died.

At first, of necessity, Mr. Lathrop's occupation was that of a farmer. He was elected for several terms, aggregating twenty-four years, to the office of Justice of the Peace. As the town grew he became a builder and contractor, and also engaged in the mercantile pursuits. Of late years he has been in no active business, but has been a money lender and devoted his attention to the management of his property.

His funeral took place on Tuesday at 2 o'clock p.m. at the house in the presence of a number of relatives and friends. The funeral services were conducted by Rev. J. A. Kirkpatrick, who enumerated the many virtues of the deceased and paid a fitting tribute to the close of so long and prosperous a career. After the ceremony the body was laid to rest in lot 339 in the Old Ground section of South Park Cemetery

*Editors Note, Ezra inherited all the land from his father who died in 1820, he owned at one time all the land from the corner where the Presbyterian church now stands, all the way till you reach the new high school, on the north side of what is now Main Street, he also built one of the first log cabins where the Dr. Weigel's eye doctor business is now located in 1822. He was the father of Rev. James Lathrop, who lived at one time where our Museum is now located.

*obit reprinted from Greensburg Weekly

Standard , Dec 11,1885

This is the second in a series of Obits about the people of Greensburg, who have streets named after them, Lathrop street is the first street after you pass Lincoln Street going east on Main street, turn left, part of the street is now closed off after the Greensburg Junior High school was remodeled , General John Wilder's House stands on the corner of Lathrop and Main Streets.

Edited and added too by Russell Wilhoit, Decatur County Historian, July 31, 2013



Clothing Maketh the Man and Woman

On Saturday, August 10, 2013, a style show featuring clothing from 1840 to the present time was organized and narrated by Donna Swinford. Modeling the outfits were members of the Swinford family, friends and Museum staff.



Photographs from the
Style Show—August 10, 2013



Museum Activities, Summer, 2013

On the 4th of July the Museum was open for visitation by parade goers and others who stopped by. As always, this was a day for families to get together and remember what it is was like "... growing up in Greensburg and Decatur County." We also were able to sell the remainder of our ice cream sundaes.

We have had a number of private tours and a continuation of genealogical and other research. The Gallery display on Decatur County farming continues, the Lura Barton Davis diaries exhibit remains, as does our clothing display.

On Saturday, August 10, 2013, a style show featuring clothing from 1840 to the present time was organized and narrated by Donna Swinford.

Upcoming Activities

Fall Festival, September 28th

A tribute to Native Americans will be our feature exhibit at the 2013 Fall Festival. Archaeologist Ben Morris will be available for commentary and questions in honor of Archaeology Day, which is celebrated at different times of the year.

Halloween

Members of the Historical Society are once again preparing to fill the museum with spooky fun for children on the afternoon of Saturday, October 26. The museum will be decorated top to bottom with storytelling, face painting, and some good witches brewing up a fun filled afternoon. Last year we have three hundred children visit the museum, so be sure to mark your calendar and bring your little goblins over for a visit this year.

Along with our annual spook tour for the children the Historical Society will be attempting our first ever ghost walk, in which visitors will walk along Franklin St. and witness the telling of five short stories by a cast of pantomiming volunteers. Tickets must be bought in advance to this event and will go on sale in October. The Ghost Walk will take place on the night Friday, October 25. The Society hopes that this first ever event will be a successful addition to our spook tour.

Museum Calendar

September

Family Farms in Decatur County

1860 Model Spencer Repeating Rifle Army Model

Lura Davis Diaries

Special Event: Fall Festival September 28th

October

Stitchery and International Crafts

Special Event: Ghost Walk the evening of Friday, October 25th

Special Event: Children's Spook Tour Saturday Afternoon, October 26th

November

100 “Things” from Decatur County—Exhibit by Greensburg High School Students

December

Christmas Decorations: Toyland

Special Event: Christmas Open House -December 8th 1-4 P.M.

Membership Form

Thank you for your support!

Membership rates are as follows:

Student	\$ 10.00 per year
Individual	\$ 15.00 per year
Family	\$ 25.00 per year
Patron	\$ 50.00 per year
Historian	\$100.00 per year

Circle type of membership at left.

Name _____

Address _____

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“The Bulletin”

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Historical Society of Decatur County Museum

Museum Hours: Tuesday and Thursday 10:00 to 2:00
Saturday 10:00 to 2:00 and Sunday 1:00 to 4:00 - April
thru December
Museum phone/fax: 663-2764
Email: dechissoc@etczone.net
After hours call 663-2997 or 663-5141

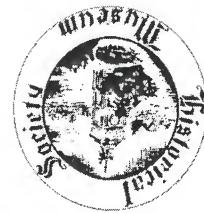
Or Current Resident

Friday 14

Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday 10-2

New Museum Hours:

Museum est. 1984
Society est. 1957



Greensburg, IN 47240

P.O. Box 163

Historical Society of Decatur County

